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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the use of voice as an effective tool in second language instruction examines the role of teachers as readers, the process of selecting and interpreting texts, preparation of reading passages, and reading aloud in class. The dimension of voice added to other aspects of language emphasizes the communicative purpose of the language, helps students exploit their full knowledge of the language, enhances the comprehensibility of the text, encourages students to develop active listening skills and increase their paralinguistic repertoires, motivates students to investigate deeper meanings in the text, and inspires skill development in reading and writing. Specific techniques and considerations in preparing to read aloud to students are outlined. (MSE)

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The added dimension of voice: creating interpersonal involvement in the SLA classroom

by Tracey Forrest

It has been approximately 300 years since the poet John Milton referred to oral reading and literature as "...Sphereborn harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse...,"and oral storytelling has, for centuries, carried instruction in all aspects of human culture. Likewise, the oral method of language teaching is almost as old as linguistic science itself.

The "primacy of speech," the "centrality of the connected text," and the "absolute priority of an oral methodology in the classroom" are three basic principles on which the Reformist Movement of English Language Teaching in the late nineteenth-century was founded. In Principles of Language Study (1921), Harold Palmer described what he called the "spontaneous capacities" of human beings to acquire language naturally through a process of subconscious assimilation. Today, Stephen Krashen (1982) makes considerable use of the notion of a "silent period" in language acquisition, listening to the language being acquired without having to produce it enhances both the "speed and quality of learning."

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Implicit in these views of language learning is the notion that voice makes meaning: linguistic meaning, as pertains to the sound system and syntactic structure of a language; as well as communicative meaning, as pertains to messages and ideas.

This paper discusses how the added dimension of voice serves as an effective tool in the second language classroom; the role of teachers as readers; and the processes of selecting and interpreting texts, preparing reading passages and reading aloud in class.

Why read aloud?

It is easy, often too easy, for teachers to take their natural communicative powers for granted. Using and responding to vocal cues, and their inherent kinesthetic attributes, seems so natural that it becomes hardly perceptible in the context of day-to-day classroom interactions.

The added dimension of voice (1) emphasizes the communicative purpose of the language; (2) helps students to exploit their full knowledge of the language; (3) enhances comprehensibility of the text; (4) encourages students to develop active listening skills and to increase their paralinguistic

repertoires; (5) motivates students to investigate deeper meanings in the text; and (6) inspires skills development in reading and writing.

Reading aloud changes a student's focus from written to spoken word and shifts attention from reading skills practice to meaning, i.e., language as communication. Speech is the key to conveying the emotional implications of a writer's idea or character; reading aloud brings the characters to life and makes them real and comprehensible. Dramatic readings help students understand what is written "between the lines." It accustoms students to interpreting written language. It adds richness to literary materials and deepens language experience by providing an opportunity for students to share the experience of interpreting and dramatizing written texts. Reading aloud also emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between listener-speaker and reader-writer in making meaning.

Reading aloud enhances literacy by making foreboding texts friendly. The complexity and vocabulary of a piece that may intimidate a student when reading alone may be readily understood when the work is heard read aloud. It is commonly known that passive vocabularies usually exceed active vocabularies by a great margin. Oral reading will call on students' listening vocabularies and help them to exploit their full knowledge of the

language by promoting active listening and more interaction with the text.

Voice captures the attention of the language student and encourages the investigation of deeper meanings in the text. It brings immediacy to the author's words, thoughts and feelings and helps the language student develop awareness of the nuances and broad range of possible interpretations of the language. This, in turn, may enhance skills development across the board: Reading aloud may provide encouragement for reading silently, and reading silently may enrich a student sufficiently to have a profound effect on his writing.

Voice is the ultimate human appealing sound. It captures the attention of the language student, and a reader's voice which imparts contagious excitement for the language may stir an otherwise passive student to motion.

Teachers as readers

The art of reading aloud is an acquired one; for most people, it must be cultivated gradually. Listening, too, is a learned skill. In both cases, experience is the best teacher.

Incorporating frequent reading sessions into routine classroom activities will offer teachers a setting for embellishing their reading skills while positioning students to take full advantage of a means of language development both tried and true.

In order to afford students the best value in classroom readings, teachers must know how to organize and present the material. They must be able to interpret and infuse meaning into the texts they read. A primary goal in a classroom reading is to demonstrate to students the importance of the reader-listener relationship. Teacher and students together will provide a shared experience: interaction as a basis for making comprehensibility.

Selecting a text

In deciding what to bring into the classroom, teachers should consider the length, linguistic accessibility and cultural relevance of the material. They may be guided by the following criteria:

1. Pieces should be short enough so that any given segment of material may be completed in one classroom period.

2. The language level of texts should be slightly higher than the productive level of the class. (For beginning students, a conversational passage should be limited to two voices.)

3. Texts should contain predominantly natural language; although it may be somewhat stylized, it should not be overwhelmingly so.

4. Texts should focus on topics, themes, and characters of high interest value to the learners and the teacher.

5. In general, texts should contribute to the students' knowledge of the target language variety and speech community, although other varieties may also be introduced.

Interpreting a text

In interpreting a text, teachers should point out the main ideas. It is neither necessary nor advisable to try to deal with subtle meanings or complex ideas which may prove to be too complicated for the group.

In a narrative or a poem, one may simply examine the author's perspective with respect to a major universal theme, such as death or love. In a dialogue or short story, a close look at the main characters might be in order: Who are they? What does each want? What is their relationship?

Rather than attempting to provide in-depth analyses of all aspects of the text, the content should be used as a basis for logically explaining the author's primary intentions. There will invariably be more than one interpretation of meaning. The value of attaining an interpretive consensus is to be able to point out how the textual information provides the foundation for drawing conclusions and making general inferences. Further, every opportunity should be taken to demonstrate how each reader-listener brings his own reality to a text which leads to his individual interpretation of meaning.

In order to provide a point of common focus for students prior to a reading, teacher can use a pre-reading activity centered around the piece's major theme or main idea. For example, he may prepare two or three questions based on the text's theme or idea. The questions may be of a general nature ("What is love?"), or a personal nature ("Have you ever been in love?"). Alternatively, teacher may bring into class an article dealing with the idea or theme in the piece selected to be read. Students may read and discuss the article, focusing on the

overall topic. Whatever activity teacher chooses to present before a classroom reading, it should be provocative; its purpose is to help students make a quick connection with what they are going to hear.

In a classroom reading, audience conception is a necessary ingredient. Teacher may prepare several post-reading questions on the text to promote thought and discussion. The questions should be mixed, both general and personal, whichever the particular text more obviously suggests. Post-reading questions may be dealt with by the whole class, in small groups, or as vehicles for student writing. During post-reading activities, teachers should remain open to new interpretations that may be the result of a "different" reading. Students should be encouraged to use their imaginations to seek other ways of understanding the piece.

Preparing a passage

Even the most experienced readers encounter difficulties when faced with a text for the first time. Sections of the text may be unclear. Certain vocabulary may present pronunciation questions. It may take several preliminary readings just to

develop a point of view with respect to the piece's overall theme.

Following are suggestions for preparing the reading passage:

1. Read the text silently to decide on its main idea.

2. Read the passage aloud to identify any pieces where pronunciation or meaning need to be clarified. Look up pronunciations; reread unclear passages, asking yourself how they fit into the overall meaning.

3. Read the entire passage again, underlining key words and phrases and thinking about places where you can look up from the page.

4. "Chunk" the material according to the natural breaks in meaning. (The size of a chunk will depend on the amount of text it takes to complete one episode or scene.)

5. Decide what voice levels and intonation patterns will be appropriate to convey the meaning. (If the voice is projected, even a whisper may be heard.)

6. Rehearse, perhaps reading to a tape recorder or a mirror.

Reading aloud in class

When reading aloud before a class, concentration on the reading task is the key to successful communication of ideas. Meaning is made not only from words: hesitations and silences also speak eloquently, and even nuances of inflection in voice tone tell a story.

The following techniques for reading aloud will add comprehensibility for the language student and make the experience rich and rewarding for all:

1. Position yourself in the room with your head higher than the heads of the listeners so that your voice will carry. (If there is a desk, stand in front of it.)

2. In general, speak more slowly than you would in normal conversation. From time to time, adjust your reading speed to fit the story; slow down and draw out your words in suspenseful sections or to emphasize the particular importance of a passage.

3. Look up from the text frequently; establish eye contact with your audience.

4. Avoid becoming preoccupied with the lines by focusing on meaning.

5. Don't be afraid to become involved with the text; respond to organic impulses that you experience in the process of reading.

It is important to note here that the basic attributes of speech alone are enough to reward listeners with increased understanding of written material. There is a distinct, albeit fine, line between oral interpretation and dramatic representation. The use of flamboyant gesture to indicate speaker intention will only undermine one's reading efforts. Flailing the arms about to indicate excitement, or grasping at the throat to suggest a lack of air are incidences of bad acting. All that is required for effective expression is to respond naturally to impulses which come as a result of the vocalization process.

Further, it is important to keep a sense of what you believe the writer's basic intentions are. Be neither undermined by the language (no matter how exalted), nor overwhelmed by the audience (no matter how inquiring). Be daring; read for the sheer music of the words, and let the medium be the message.

Summary

Listening to oral presentation of written text quickly creates a sense of involvement for the listener. Actually, it is not the point-by-point detail in the text which is important, but the dynamics of creating interpersonal involvement that motivates and makes it possible for students to understand abstract ideas. The voice of a reader may sweep the hearer along, encouraging him to make associations of meaning and to create mental images which parallel the ideas that the speaker is creating with words, images which may sufficiently arouse a student to set him on a permanent course of accessibility to the endless rewards of the language experience.

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